

[< Previous installment](#)
[Textbooks and Teaching](#)

[Home](#) > [2010: Teaching U.S. History Abroad](#) > Teaching U.S. History in German Universities
Transcending Intellectual Nationalism: Teaching U.S. History in German Universities

Sabine N. Meyer

Westfälische Wilhelms-University

Pioneers live in isolated places, have to make do with scarce local resources, have to assert and defend their existence against various man-made and natural obstacles, and, in order to secure more than their bare subsistence, depend on a network of exchange whose operators are far away and beyond their control. While local conditions shape their daily lives and provide a living, they know they need to communicate and exchange goods with the more densely populated centers of production and consumption. In that sense, I think of myself as a pioneer writing and teaching American history under frontier conditions.

—Willi Paul Adams, “On the Significance of Frontiers in Writing American History in Germany,” *Journal of American History*, Sept. 1992.

With those words, Willi Paul Adams described his position as a German historian researching and teaching U.S. history in German universities. Regarding the discipline of U.S. history, he likened Germany to the American frontier settlements of the nineteenth century, focusing on the lack of resources, the “man-made and natural obstacles” scholars face in the course of their work, and the dearth of intranational networks. The real “centers of production and consumption,” he argued, are in the United States and therefore difficult to access.^[1]

While his description holds some truth, I would like to shed a more positive light on the work of German scholars active in the field of U.S. history in Germany. In the last two decades, their mobility has greatly increased, allowing closer collaboration with U.S. history scholars all over the world. The Internet has facilitated these interdisciplinary, intercultural, and multilingual networks and has enabled these German scholars to tap into the treasures of American libraries and access research literature and source material. Despite obstacles, such as some students’ lack of historians’ tools and occasional language difficulties, teaching U.S. history in German universities offers a singular chance to help students negotiate their self-understanding and their understanding of others and thus to enhance their intercultural competence.

Teaching U.S. history in Germany is not restricted to history or political science departments; it also takes place in English and American studies departments, the latter being amalgams of language, literature, history, and culture. Some of the scholars in those departments are “purist” historians, while others, like myself, have degrees in history and American studies. One result of this structural interdisciplinarity in the German university system is that one often teaches U.S. history to language and literature specialists rather than to trained historians. It is certainly challenging to introduce efficiently the tools of historical analysis to these students and make them understand the worth of analyzing source material. After some initial skepticism, however, they learn to appreciate the benefits they can reap from analyzing historical documents. If the instructor simultaneously introduces literary renderings of the topic at hand, such as Walt Whitman’s poem “A Passage to India” in the context of expansionism, the students begin to acknowledge the true worth of interdisciplinary work.^[2]

Language difficulties present another challenge of teaching U.S. history to German students, especially in a history department, where students mostly do not study English per se. Instructors need to set aside time for questions on vocabulary and grammar because linguistic issues, such as difficult vocabulary or grammatical structures, can lead to a lack of understanding or misunderstandings of sources and thus hamper discussions. Despite the higher language proficiency of students from English or American studies departments, where English is the main language of communication, teachers of U.S. history have to make particular efforts to encourage students into stimulating discussions in English. Afraid to embarrass themselves and conscious of their felt lack of language skills, many students hide behind their texts or within the mass of students, particularly in large classes. Instructors therefore must choose material that will inspire discussions and involve

students in projects geared toward reducing their linguistic inhibitions. A good example of this type of project is a “talk show,” a format I regularly employ in my undergraduate classes when talking about controversial issues such as women’s rights in the nineteenth century. Each student receives one source embodying a position on the “woman question” and is required to represent this position in a talk show in class. In one case, I staged a discussion among Anne Bradstreet, William Blackstone, Judith Sargent Murray, Margaret Fuller, Catherine Beecher, and the Grimké sisters, Sarah and Angelina. Students usually find this exercise very funny, engage in verbal skirmishes and heated debates, and try to imitate certain accents, thereby overcoming their English-language inhibitions. Simultaneously, they learn the intricacies of the historical issue at stake. Notwithstanding such challenges, teaching U.S. history to German students opens up a plethora of opportunities in the realms of intercultural competence and identity construction. Since Karl-Ernst Jeismann introduced the idea of a *Geschichtsbewusstsein* (historical consciousness) in 1977, scholars in the field of historical pedagogy have increasingly considered history the result of a process of reconstruction by each generation. They have also viewed *Geschichtsbewusstsein* as an important factor in understanding the present and thus oneself, linking it to concepts of *Selbstverstehen* (self-understanding) and *Fremdverstehen* (understanding of others) in the context of intercultural learning. Such *Selbstverstehen* and *Fremdverstehen* promote processes of identity formation, especially in children and young adults.[\[3\]](#)

Learning about U.S. history can help students understand the American other (*Fremdverstehen*) and thus deconstruct the wide array of clichés and stereotypes about the United States prevalent in German society. Over the last few decades the disciplines of American studies and history have undergone tremendous transformations regarding the content and methods of research and teaching, which have led to a negotiation of long-standing “truths” in university circles, but these new perspectives have not reached German high school curricula and teaching styles to the same degree. Many German students still enter university with a set of stereotypes and clichés that were taught in school and/or fostered through popular culture, the media, and the current political and intellectual discourses. Consequently, they see the United States as a chauvinistic and imperialist country, lacking “real” culture, due to its rampant materialism, and uncaring about the environment. Germans often perceive Americans as superficial, self-centered, ignorant, and therefore not interested in other countries. Such anti-Americanism has a long tradition, going back as far as the first contacts of European travelers with the New World and most recently fueled by the neoconservative foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration. Other German students, by contrast, are overly enthusiastic about the United States, buying into what is commonly referred to as American exceptionalism. Such pro-Americans point to the beneficial political system of the United States and wholeheartedly believe the tenets of the American dream: equal opportunities for everyone and the pursuit of happiness. They praise American popular culture, especially tv shows and music, and higher education.[\[4\]](#)

The majority of German students of American history, language, and culture, however, can be found outside the extremely anti-Americanist and the overly positive camps. If they were openly hostile to the United States, they probably would not have chosen the subject, and their constant exposure to the harsh criticism of the Bush administration, on both American and German soil, has made an uncritical belief in American exceptionalism impossible. In fact, most students feel ambivalent about the United States, having constantly to negotiate their enthusiasm and criticism. This “dynamic love-hate cultural relationship” seems to be the situation in which most Europeans find themselves.[\[5\]](#)

Teachers of U.S. history at German universities must address this love-hate relationship, for it influences their teaching methods. Two stories from my own classroom experience illustrate how difficult it can be for a teacher to walk the fine line between being overly critical of and overly enthusiastic about the United States. If one is overly critical, students see their worst fears about the United States confirmed and thus do not question their stereotypes. If one is overly positive, they suspect one is an “American in disguise,” which also leads them to hold onto their stereotypes. Teachers of U.S. history in Germany must constantly monitor themselves and renegotiate their own feelings of enthusiasm and criticism about the United States.

In a class on American expansionism with a focus on the annexation of Texas, we discussed John O’Sullivan’s “Annexation” (1845). After we talked about the idea of Manifest Destiny and its inherent chauvinism, the student responsible for preparing a report on the historical context gave her presentation. Obviously, I had

expressed my criticism of the text too overtly and had thus unwillingly confirmed the student's worst beliefs about imperial America; the student commented on the annexation of Texas with the following triumphant statement: "And sure enough, Americans—arrogant as they are—finally annexed Texas." This was a pivotal point in the seminar, the sort of unexpected crisis that one needs to be prepared to handle. The immediate reaction of the other participants ranged from giggling in amazement to expressions of support, and all of the students immediately turned their heads to look at me, eagerly awaiting my response. I pointed out the degree to which such a subjective expression of opinion was problematic, especially for those aiming to become teachers and thus the future multipliers of knowledge on the United States. I then explained their duty as academics to engage themselves in the theoretical discussions of their disciplines and to reflect carefully on and negotiate prevalent clichés and stereotypes about the United States. Most importantly, I tried to dismantle their stereotypes by talking about imperialism in nineteenth-century Europe, with a particular focus on Germany. Wishing for a *Platz an der Sonne* (a place in the sun—a phrase coined by the German secretary of state in 1897), I made sure to point out, was certainly not an exceptionally American phenomenon.^[6] The second episode took place in another seminar, also dealing with U.S. expansionism. After discussing Whitman's "A Passage to India" as a literary rendering of American expansionism and after my comment that this poem seems to represent a more inclusive, less chauvinistic version of Manifest Destiny, a student pointed out that she felt Whitman had neglected to emphasize the pitfalls of expansionism, such as the treatment of Native Americans. To her taste, this poem was too optimistic, expressing far too much national pride. This remark was foreseeable in a German classroom. Due to our ongoing struggle to come to terms with our past, specifically the Third Reich and the Holocaust, we tend to be overly sensitive to and skeptical of expressions of national pride and patriotism. In contrast to the United States, Germany has what the German Jewish American Hannah Arendt called a "fundamentally negative founding myth." Besides this historical background, however, my supposedly overly positive interpretation of the poem may have engendered the student's remark.^[7]

Selbstverstehen is at least as important as Fremdverstehen, and studying U.S. history and culture can significantly enhance Germans' understanding of themselves, as American racial and ethnic history illustrates. Topics such as slavery and nativism interest German students, not only because their consequences are still visible today but also because German students, and indeed Germans in general, tend to perceive these issues as distinctly American and hardly ever connect them with the current situation in Germany.

Many Germans insist, despite all signs to the contrary, that "Germany is not a classic country of immigration, and because of its history, geography, and economic conditions, it cannot be one." Judgments such as this have several roots. First, largely due to Germany's lack of territorial and political unity in the nineteenth century, the German "concept of nation was based not on a political vision . . . but on a predominantly ethnic concept of nation." Second, "until the 1960s Germany was first and foremost a country of emigration." Third, as scholars have only recently begun to argue, this insistence on ethnic homogeneity has to do with perceptions of race in Germany. After 1945, questions of race became taboo in German public discourse and were mostly associated with the United States or other Western European countries. This failure to reflect on how notions of racial difference have shaped post-1945 German society has deprived German minorities of the verbal and analytical tools needed to handle experiences of social exclusion. Therefore, claiming race as a category could be "politically enabling and historically illuminating."^[8]

These insights must be on the mind of every scholar teaching U.S. history to German students and must influence the selection of topics and materials. My classroom experience has shown that comparative approaches, which have become popular in the context of the transnational turn in American studies and history, are the best way of making students aware of the need to discuss race as a category and to reevaluate race relations in Germany. Such comparative approaches are not meant to promote universalist arguments, which could be used to legitimize phenomena such as imperialism, colonialism, and racism. To avoid such universalism, teachers must emphasize the specifics of time and place.

When I talked with my students about immigration to the United States in the summer of 2009, I spent much time on the issue of nativism. To sensitize them to anti-immigration sentiments in nineteenth-century America, I gave them excerpts from platforms of the American party and Josiah Strong's "Perils—Immigration"

(1885).^[9] I entered into a detailed analysis of the rhetoric of these sources and their authors' view of immigrants as immoral, corruptible, lazy, and narrow-minded—in short, as a danger to national health and wealth. The students were shocked at the xenophobia and feelings of cultural and national superiority displayed in the texts, quickly found fault with their authors, and fell back on long-cherished anti-American stereotypes, classifying the sources as typically American. With the students thus worked up, I distributed an excerpt of the 2002 program of the Republican party of Germany, to show that the rhetoric and arguments of this twenty-first-century German document are alarmingly similar to those of the nineteenth-century American sources. Upon realizing this, the students were at first uncomfortably quiet but then started engaging in fervent debates. One group of students argued that the Republican party program was just a minority view and thus not representative of German public discourse. Others argued that the situation of immigrants in Germany was completely different from that in the United States, that immigrants were pampered by the welfare state, and that a comparison was therefore not possible. A third group advocated a more open and tolerant attitude toward immigration to Germany and a change of public discourse. I let them debate without commenting much. Shortly before concluding the lesson, however, I encouraged them to apply the academic expertise they displayed in the analysis of American sources to the German debate on immigration and to pay attention to the discursive continuities. I also warned them against letting themselves be carried away by simplistic “bar talk.” Through such comparative analyses, German students reevaluate their perception that issues of race and immigration are particularly American phenomena and that their own country is neither an immigration country nor does it witness the same kind of racism as the United States. Such insights can lead them to detect inconsistencies between their judgments of American racism and xenophobia and their opinions on similar questions in Germany and help them better understand themselves and their surroundings. Such Selbstverstehen, an integral part of intercultural learning, promotes processes of identity formation and thus contributes to the emergence of a new present with a new Geschichtsbewusstsein.

In an article on teaching U.S. history in Italy, Maurizio Vaudagna argues that a non-English-speaking American historian abroad is not simply another Americanist who happens to live overseas and possibly takes advantage of his or her different intellectual traditions and historical methodologies in his or her research. The difference is much deeper; it involves research themes, institutional positions, scholarly standards, and the pressure to act . . . as a molder of public opinion. . . . The American historian abroad, speaking a language other than English, is a significantly different type of intellectual from her or his American counterpart.

Vaudagna's statement also holds true for German historians of the United States, for their specific working environment shapes them as well as their work. Teaching U.S. history in German universities poses challenges, such as teaching the subject in a philological faculty environment to nonnative speakers. Its multiple opportunities make it a fascinating endeavor, however. On the one hand, our students are the politicians, journalists, writers, teachers, and filmmakers of tomorrow and will thus influence the future Geschichtsbewusstsein. The teacher of U.S. history thus becomes, as Vaudagna says, “a molder of public opinion,” inspiring greater Fremdverstehen and Selbstverstehen. On the other hand, the work of German U.S. historians is also of great relevance to the American practitioners of the discipline. Just because they are not mirror images of their American colleagues does not mean that German U.S. historians are pioneers, barely making ends meet in a sparsely populated frontier settlement, peeking longingly across the Atlantic. On the contrary, our “different intellectual traditions and historical methodologies,” our status as nonnative speakers, and our different cultural background and Geschichtsbewusstsein lead to fresh readings of American sources. Such new insights and a fruitful cooperation between German U.S. historians and other scholars of American history all over the world can transcend what Willi Paul Adams called “intellectual nationalism.”^[10]

[1] Sabine N. Meyer teaches American history, literature, and culture in the Department of American Studies at Westfälische Wilhelms-University Münster, Germany. Her research has centered on the American temperance movement with a focus on ethnicity, gender, and civic identity. The author wishes to thank Maria I. Diedrich, Michael Hochgeschwender, and Paul Spickard for their inspiring criticisms.

Readers may contact Meyer at s.meyer@uni-muenster.de.

Willi Paul Adams, “On the Significance of Frontiers in Writing American History in Germany,” *Journal of*

American History, 79 (Sept. 1992), 463.

[2] Philipp Gassert, "The Study of U.S. History in Germany," in *Teaching and Studying U.S. History in Europe: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Cornelis A. van Minnen and Sylvia L. Hilton (Amsterdam, 2007), 117; Marie Bolton, "Poor Relation or Honorable Peer? Reflections on American History in French Universities," *History Teacher*, 36 (Aug. 2003), 447; Walt Whitman, "A Passage to India," in *Leaves of Grass*, by Walt Whitman (New York, 1855).

[3] Karl-Ernst Jeismann, "Didaktik der Geschichte: Die Wissenschaft von Zustand, Funktion, und Veränderung geschichtlicher Vorstellungen im Selbstverständnis der Gegenwart" (The didactics of history: The science of the condition, function, and change of historical ideas in the self-image of the present), in *Geschichtswissenschaft. Didaktik—Forschung—Theorie* (History. Didactics—Research—Theory), ed. Erich Kosthorst (Göttingen, 1977), 9–33. Bernd Schönemann, "Geschichtsdidaktik, Geschichtskultur, Geschichtswissenschaft" (Historical didactics, historical culture, history), in *Geschichtsdidaktik: Praxishandbuch für die Sekundarstufe I und II* (Historical didactics: A practical textbook for secondary schools), ed. Hilke Günther-Arndt (Berlin, 2003), 11, 12, 15, 17; Dietmar von Reeken, "Interkulturelles Lernen im Geschichtsunterricht" (Intercultural learning in history classes), in *Geschichtsdidaktik*, ed. Günther-Arndt, 234, 238.

[4] Udo J. Hebel, *Einführung in die Amerikanistik/American Studies* (An introduction to American studies) (Stuttgart, 2008), 396–99, 410–16. On German perceptions of the United States, see Cornelis A. van Minnen and Sylvia L. Hilton, "The Academic Study of U.S. History in Europe," in *Teaching and Studying U.S. History in Europe*, ed. van Minnen and Hilton, 13; Andreas Falke, "The End of German-American Relations . . . 'As We Know Them,'" *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 50 (nos. 1–2, 2005), 131–32, 136–37, 140, 142, 148; and Russell A. Berman, "Anti-Americanism and Americanization," in *Americanization and Anti-Americanism: The German Encounter with American Culture after 1945*, ed. Alexander Stephan (New York, 2005), 12, 16.

[5] Van Minnen and Hilton, "Academic Study of U.S. History in Europe," 14.

[6] John O'Sullivan, "Annexation," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, 17 (July–Aug. 1845), 5–10. The phrase *Platz an der Sonne* was coined by Bernhard von Bülow—then secretary of state for foreign affairs and later chancellor of the Reich—in a speech on December 6, 1897, and could be read as a German equivalent of Manifest Destiny. Dirk van Laak, *Über alles in der Welt: Deutscher Imperialismus im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Above all in the world: German imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries) (Munich, 2005), 74.

[7] Hannah Arendt quoted in Adams, "On the Significance of Frontiers in Writing American History in Germany," 466.

[8] For the 2004 statement from the Bavarian Christian Social Union party that "Germany is not a classic country of immigration . . .," see Deniz Göktürk, David Gramling, and Anton Kaes, eds., *Germany in Transit: Nation and Migration, 1955–2005* (Berkeley, 2007), 4. On Germany's "ethnic concept of nation" and Germany being "a country of emigration," see Birgit Rommelspacher, "Dynamics of Integration and Segregation: Ethnic Minorities in Germany," in *Crossing Boundaries: African American Inner City and European Migrant Youth*, ed. Maria Diedrich (Münster, 2004), 115–17; and Gianni D'Amato, *Vom Ausländer zum Bürger: Der Streit um die politische Integration von Einwanderern in Deutschland, Frankreich und der Schweiz* (From foreigner to citizen: The dispute over the political integration of immigrants in Germany, France, and Switzerland) (Münster, 2001), 54, 56–57. On questions of race in Germany, see Heide Fehrenbach, "'Race' and 'Ethnicity' in Post-war Germany: How Mixed Race Children Remade the Family and Challenged German Ideas of Race," *Tagesspiegel*, Sept. 14, 2008, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/zeitung/Sonderthemen;art893,2613500>.

[9] Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York, 1885), 30–46.

[10] Maurizio Vaudagna, "The American Historian in Continental Europe: An Italian Perspective," *Journal of American History*, 79 (Sept. 1992), 535–36; Adams, "On the Significance of Frontiers in Writing American History in Germany," 471.

[\[Return to Top\]](#)

Sabine N. Meyer, "Transcending Intellectual Nationalism: Teaching U.S. History in German Universities."

Journal of American History 96 (March 2010),
<http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/textbooks/2010/meyer.html>
© Copyright [Organization of American Historians](#). All rights reserved.
2010

Teaching U.S. History Abroad

[Teaching U.S. History Abroad](#)

Scott E. Casper

[Living against America: Classroom Encounters in Beirut](#)

Patrick McGreevy

[Transcending Intellectual Nationalism: Teaching U.S. History in German Universities](#)

Sabine N. Meyer

[Balancing the Local and the Global: The American Civil War in Western Canadian Classrooms](#)

Frank Towers

[Exploring the “American Obsession” Down Under: Teaching Civil Rights History in Australia](#)

Timothy J. Minchin

[What’s So Bad about Polygamy? Teaching American Religious History in the Muslim Middle East](#)

Patrick Q. Mason

[Learning about Civil War, Separatism, and Nation Building through Teaching in the Turkish Republic](#)

Tim Roberts

[Teaching Secession and the Civil War in Scotland](#)

Paul Quigley

[“Because It Is My Culture”: Technology and Agency in the Overseas U.S. Cultural History Classroom](#)

JoAnne Marie Mancini

[Ten Years of Teaching U.S. History at unicamp, Brazil: A Memoir](#)

Celia M. Azevedo

[Teaching U.S. History in Russia: Issues, Challenges, and Prospects](#)

Ivan I. Kurilla and Victoria I. Zhuravleva

“Textbooks and Teaching” is published by the [Journal of American History](#).